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Exploring the Lived Experiences of Female School Principals in Their Relationships with Students

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore and interpret the lived experiences of married female principals in girls' upper secondary schools regarding their interactions and relationships with students. This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in descriptive phenomenology to capture the essence of principals' lived experiences. The participants consisted of twelve married female principals working in public girls' upper secondary schools across five educational districts of Tabriz. Participants were selected through purposive and theoretical sampling based on defined inclusion criteria, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich narratives about principals' daily experiences with students. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed concurrently with data collection. Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method was used to systematically analyze the data, and strategies such as prolonged engagement, member checking, and careful coding review were applied to ensure credibility and dependability. Data analysis resulted in the identification of a central theme labeled students' issues, encompassing several interrelated sub-themes. These included the necessity of human relationships and addressing students' emotional deprivation, low academic motivation, the need for self-care programs, academic decline associated with marriage and migration, non-compliance with health care practices, lack of interest in technical and vocational tracks, the impact of parental divorce, and spousal opposition to continued education. Collectively, these findings indicate that principals experience student-related challenges as emotionally intensive, multifaceted, and deeply embedded in students' social and familial contexts. The findings demonstrate that interactions with students constitute a core dimension of female principals' leadership experiences, characterized by emotional labor, ethical responsibility, and relational engagement, underscoring the need for leadership support structures that address both academic and psychosocial aspects of schooling.

Keywords: Female school principals; lived experience; student-related issues; descriptive phenomenology; secondary education

Introduction

Educational leadership has increasingly been recognized as a central determinant of school effectiveness, student development, and the overall quality of educational systems. Within this broad field, the role of school principals has evolved from a primarily administrative function to a multidimensional form of leadership that integrates instructional guidance, emotional support, organizational management, and ethical responsibility. Contemporary research emphasizes that effective

school leadership is closely linked to students' academic achievement, psychosocial well-being, and equitable learning opportunities, particularly in secondary education where students face complex developmental, social, and academic challenges (1, 2). As educational environments become more diverse and socially demanding, principals are increasingly required to respond to students' emotional needs, behavioral issues, family-related problems, and motivational difficulties, positioning leadership as a deeply relational and human-centered practice.

Within this context, female school leadership has gained growing scholarly attention, both globally and regionally. Studies across different cultural settings indicate that women principals often adopt leadership approaches characterized by relational sensitivity, empathy, inclusiveness, and ethical responsiveness, which may directly influence students' school experiences and engagement (3, 4). Female leaders are frequently described as emphasizing communication, care, and emotional attunement, particularly when interacting with vulnerable student populations. These leadership characteristics are increasingly viewed as essential for addressing contemporary student issues such as declining motivation, emotional distress, family instability, and social inequality (5, 6).

The interaction between school principals and students represents a critical yet underexplored dimension of educational leadership. While a substantial body of literature has examined principals' relationships with teachers, staff, and policy frameworks, fewer studies have focused explicitly on principals' lived experiences in their direct engagement with students. This gap is particularly evident in qualitative research that seeks to understand how principals perceive, interpret, and emotionally process their daily encounters with students. Existing quantitative studies suggest that principals' leadership behaviors can significantly affect student outcomes, including academic performance, school attachment, and psychosocial adjustment (7, 8). However, these findings provide limited insight into the subjective meanings and emotional dimensions underlying such relationships.

Research on female principals highlights that women leaders often navigate complex intersections of professional responsibility, gender expectations, and personal identity. In many societies, female principals are simultaneously expected to fulfill nurturing roles while maintaining authority and organizational control. This dual expectation can intensify their emotional involvement in student-related matters, particularly in contexts where students experience social vulnerability, family disruption, or educational disadvantage (3, 9). Qualitative studies conducted in diverse cultural settings reveal that female principals frequently perceive students' problems not merely as disciplinary or academic issues but as deeply embedded in broader social, familial, and emotional contexts (10, 11).

Student-related challenges have become increasingly complex in recent years. Global and regional studies report rising concerns related to students' academic disengagement, mental health difficulties, family instability, migration-related disruptions, and health-related behaviors. Principals are often required to address issues such as early marriage, parental divorce, spousal opposition to continued education, and declining academic motivation, particularly among adolescent girls (5, 12). These challenges are not only educational but also social and cultural, requiring principals to act as mediators between students, families, and institutional expectations. Female principals, in particular, may experience heightened emotional involvement in these situations due to culturally ascribed caregiving roles and gendered leadership expectations (4, 6).

The literature further suggests that leadership grounded in care, empathy, and relational ethics can positively influence students' sense of belonging and emotional security at school. Inclusive and student-centered leadership approaches have been associated with improved engagement, reduced dropout rates, and enhanced well-being, especially in contexts marked by inequality or social stress (13, 14). Female principals are often positioned as key agents in fostering such environments, particularly in girls' schools where gender-sensitive leadership may play a crucial role in addressing students' specific educational and emotional needs.

Despite the growing recognition of these dynamics, there remains a notable lack of research exploring female principals' lived experiences of interacting with students from a phenomenological perspective. Much of the existing literature relies on surveys, leadership models, or outcome-based indicators, which, while valuable, do not capture the depth of meaning, emotional labor, and interpretive processes that shape principals' daily experiences (2, 15). Phenomenological inquiry offers a powerful methodological framework for addressing this gap by focusing on how individuals experience and make sense of their social worlds, thereby illuminating the essence of leadership as it is lived rather than merely enacted.

In the Iranian educational context, and particularly in urban settings such as Tabriz, school principals operate within a complex socio-cultural environment shaped by traditional family norms, gender expectations, and evolving educational policies. Recent Iranian studies emphasize the growing demands placed on school leaders to balance managerial effectiveness with social responsibility, student support, and sustainable development goals (16, 17). At the same time, educational systems are undergoing rapid transformation due to technological change, social mobility, and shifting student aspirations, further complicating principals' roles (18, 19). These dynamics underscore the importance of understanding how female principals experience their interactions with students within this specific cultural and institutional context.

International evidence also points to the significance of leadership styles and power relations in shaping school climates and student experiences. Studies indicate that female principals' leadership styles are often associated with lower power distance, greater participatory decision-making, and enhanced relational trust, which may influence how students perceive authority and support within schools (20, 21). However, the extent to which these leadership characteristics translate into lived experiences in daily student interactions remains insufficiently explored, particularly through qualitative methodologies.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath have further highlighted the emotional and relational dimensions of school leadership. Research conducted during periods of crisis demonstrates that women principals frequently played pivotal roles in maintaining student engagement, emotional stability, and continuity of learning under conditions of uncertainty (5, 13). These findings reinforce the argument that principals' relationships with students are central to educational resilience and recovery, yet the subjective experiences underlying these roles remain largely undocumented.

Given these considerations, there is a clear need for in-depth qualitative research that explores how female school principals experience and interpret their relationships with students, particularly in secondary education settings. Such research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of leadership as an embodied, emotional, and contextually embedded practice. By focusing on lived experience, phenomenological studies can reveal the meanings, challenges, and coping strategies that shape principals' engagement with student-related issues, thereby informing leadership training, policy development, and support mechanisms tailored to the realities of female school leaders (2, 3).

Understanding these experiences is also essential for promoting equity and inclusion in education. Leadership that is attuned to students' emotional and social needs is increasingly recognized as a key driver of equitable learning outcomes, particularly for marginalized or at-risk students (1, 14). Female principals' perspectives offer valuable insights into how schools can function as supportive environments that address both academic and non-academic dimensions of student development.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study was to explore the lived experiences of married female principals in girls' upper secondary schools in Tabriz regarding their interactions and relationships with students, using a descriptive phenomenological approach.

Methods and Materials

The present study adopted a qualitative research approach using descriptive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology was selected because its primary purpose is to generate a rich and comprehensive description of a lived phenomenon in order

to grasp its essential structure as experienced by individuals. In line with this aim, the focus of the study was on understanding how married female school principals experience school management in relation to students, with particular attention to the meanings they attribute to their daily interactions, responsibilities, challenges, and emotional engagements within the school context. The research was applied in nature, as it sought to produce knowledge that could inform educational practice, leadership development, and policy-making related to female school leadership.

The research population consisted of married female principals working in public girls' upper secondary schools in the five educational districts of Tabriz city. Participant selection followed a purposive and theoretical sampling strategy, continuing until theoretical saturation was achieved. Inclusion criteria were defined to ensure that participants possessed rich and relevant experiences of the phenomenon under study. These criteria included being married, having a minimum of five years of experience in a school leadership position, holding at least a master's degree, and having at least one child. Based on these criteria, twelve principals were purposefully selected and participated in the study. The participants varied in terms of academic background, years of service, managerial experience, number of children, and district of service, which contributed to the depth and diversity of perspectives captured in the data. Sampling was terminated when additional interviews no longer yielded new meanings or themes, indicating that data saturation had been reached.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which are considered an appropriate and effective tool in phenomenological research for accessing participants' lived experiences. An interview guide was developed to facilitate the exploration of the participants' experiences while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. The initial framework of the interview questions was designed based on consultations with subject-matter experts, findings from a preliminary exploratory study, and a review of relevant theoretical foundations and prior literature related to female school leadership and lived experience. The interview questions were open-ended and focused on eliciting detailed narratives about the principals' experiences of interacting with students, managing student-related issues, balancing emotional and professional roles, and negotiating their leadership identity within the school environment.

Interviews were conducted individually in a quiet and comfortable setting agreed upon by the participants, ensuring confidentiality and psychological safety. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants. Field notes were also taken during and immediately after the interviews to capture non-verbal cues, contextual details, and the researcher's reflective observations. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, allowing emerging insights to inform subsequent interviews and enabling deeper exploration of significant aspects of the phenomenon.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the data, multiple strategies were employed. Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement in the field, persistent observation, and member checking. After preliminary findings were generated, summaries and interpretations were returned to participants for confirmation and clarification, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected their experiences. Rich, verbatim quotations were also used extensively to strengthen the authenticity and credibility of the findings. Dependability was supported through careful documentation of the research process, continuous review of interview transcripts, and repeated checks during transcription to minimize errors. Additionally, coding decisions were revisited and compared to ensure consistency and coherence throughout the analysis process.

Data analysis was carried out using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method, which is specifically designed to systematically analyze lived experience data and to uncover the essential structure of a phenomenon. The analysis began with repeated, careful reading of all interview transcripts in order to gain an overall sense of the participants' experiences and to become deeply immersed in the data. This step enabled the researcher to approach the data holistically before focusing on specific meanings.

In the next phase, significant statements and phrases that directly related to the phenomenon of female principals' experiences with students were identified and extracted from each transcript. These statements were then examined closely to formulate meanings, a process that involved interpreting the underlying significance of each statement while remaining faithful to the participants' original expressions. The formulated meanings were subsequently organized into clusters of themes by identifying patterns, similarities, and conceptual connections among them. These thematic clusters were continually compared with the original transcripts to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' accounts and did not distort their intended meanings.

Following this, all the resulting themes were integrated into an exhaustive description that provided a comprehensive portrayal of the phenomenon under investigation. This description captured both the individual and shared dimensions of the participants' lived experiences. The exhaustive description was then refined into a clear and concise statement of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, often referred to as the essence of the lived experience. As a final validation step, the researcher returned to the participants to seek their feedback on the findings, either through follow-up interviews or individual consultations. This process enabled final validation of the results and ensured that the derived themes and structural description resonated with the participants' own perceptions and experiences.

Findings and Results

The participants consisted of twelve married female principals working in public girls' upper secondary schools across the five educational districts of Tabriz. All participants held postgraduate qualifications, with the majority having a master's degree in educational management, while others held degrees in fields such as curriculum planning, physics, English language teaching, Persian literature, and jurisprudence and law. One participant held a doctoral degree. The principals had extensive professional experience, with total years of service ranging from approximately 26 to 35 years and managerial experience varying between 8 and 22 years, indicating a high level of professional maturity and leadership exposure. All participants had at least one child, with the number of children ranging from one to three, reflecting diverse family responsibilities alongside professional roles. Their distribution across different educational districts ensured contextual diversity and contributed to a broader understanding of student-related experiences within varying school environments.

Table 1. Qualitative Results: Lived Experiences of Female Principals in Relation to Students

Main Category	Sub-Category
Students' Issues	Necessity of human relationships and addressing emotional deprivation
	Low academic motivation
	Need for self-care programs
	Academic decline resulting from marriage
	Academic decline associated with migration
	Non-compliance with health care practices
	Lack of interest in technical and vocational tracks
	Parental divorce
Spousal opposition to continuing education	

Analysis of the interview data led to the identification of one overarching main category labeled *Students' Issues*, which encompassed a range of interconnected sub-categories reflecting the lived experiences of female principals in their daily interactions with students. These sub-categories included the necessity of human relationships and addressing emotional deprivation, low academic motivation, the need for self-care programs, academic decline resulting from marriage, academic decline associated with migration, non-compliance with health care practices, lack of interest in technical and vocational tracks, experiences of parental divorce, and spousal opposition to continuing education. Together, these sub-categories formed a

comprehensive representation of the multifaceted challenges faced by students as perceived and experienced by school principals, highlighting both academic and psychosocial dimensions of student life.

The sub-category concerning the necessity of human relationships and addressing emotional deprivation reflected principals' strong emphasis on students' emotional needs. Participants described students as increasingly seeking emotional support, empathy, and a sense of belonging within the school environment, often compensating for emotional gaps experienced at home. Principals reported that establishing warm, trust-based relationships was not only a moral responsibility but also a critical factor in fostering students' engagement, emotional security, and openness to guidance.

Low academic motivation emerged as another salient sub-category, with principals noting a noticeable decline in students' enthusiasm for learning and academic persistence. Participants attributed this issue to a combination of factors, including family problems, unclear future prospects, socio-economic pressures, and diminished perceptions of education as a pathway to personal advancement. Principals frequently described their efforts to motivate students through counseling, encouragement, and individualized support, while acknowledging the structural limitations they faced.

The need for self-care programs was highlighted as a response to increasing psychological stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion among students. Principals emphasized that many students lacked basic skills related to emotional regulation, stress management, and self-protection, particularly in the face of academic pressure and social challenges. From their perspective, the absence of structured self-care and life-skills programs left students vulnerable and reduced their capacity to cope effectively with daily demands.

Academic decline resulting from early or student marriage was identified as a critical concern. Participants reported that students who married during their schooling often experienced reduced concentration, irregular attendance, and, in some cases, complete withdrawal from education. Principals described marriage as introducing new roles and responsibilities that conflicted with academic demands, thereby limiting students' ability to sustain educational progress.

Similarly, academic decline associated with migration was frequently mentioned, particularly in cases where students or their families relocated due to economic, social, or familial reasons. Principals explained that migration disrupted students' educational continuity, social networks, and emotional stability, often leading to learning gaps, adjustment difficulties, and reduced academic performance in the new school context.

Non-compliance with health care practices constituted another sub-category, reflecting principals' concerns about students' neglect of personal hygiene, nutrition, and basic health behaviors. Participants linked these issues to insufficient family supervision, lack of health education, and, in some cases, economic hardship. Principals viewed these behaviors as indirectly affecting students' academic readiness, attendance, and overall well-being.

Lack of interest in technical and vocational education tracks was also emphasized, with principals noting that many students and families perceived these pathways as socially inferior or lacking future prospects. This negative attitude often resulted in disengagement among students enrolled in such tracks, reduced motivation, and feelings of academic failure or marginalization within the school system.

Parental divorce emerged as a significant psychosocial factor influencing students' emotional and academic functioning. Principals described students from divorced families as more prone to emotional instability, behavioral issues, and academic difficulties. They highlighted the additional emotional labor required from school leaders and staff to support these students and mitigate the negative consequences of family disruption.

Finally, spousal opposition to continuing education was identified as a sub-category affecting some students, particularly those facing traditional gender expectations. Principals reported cases in which students were discouraged or explicitly prevented by their spouses or families from continuing their education, leading to forced dropout or persistent psychological

distress. Participants viewed this issue as deeply rooted in cultural norms and emphasized the need for broader social awareness and supportive policies to protect students' educational rights.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study provide a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of married female principals in their interactions with students, revealing that student-related issues constitute a central and emotionally demanding dimension of school leadership. The overarching theme of students' issues encompassed a wide range of academic, emotional, social, and health-related challenges, underscoring the multifaceted nature of principals' engagement with students. These findings reinforce the growing body of literature that conceptualizes educational leadership not merely as an administrative or instructional role, but as a relational and care-oriented practice deeply embedded in students' lived realities (1, 2).

One of the most salient findings concerned the perceived necessity of human relationships and addressing students' emotional deprivation. Female principals consistently emphasized that many students seek emotional security, empathy, and understanding within the school environment, often compensating for deficiencies in family support. This finding aligns with prior research highlighting the relational orientation of female leadership and its emphasis on empathy, care, and emotional attunement (3, 4). Studies conducted in diverse cultural contexts suggest that women principals are more likely to adopt nurturing and supportive leadership approaches, which can foster students' sense of belonging and emotional safety (6, 10). The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that such relational engagement is not an optional leadership style but a perceived necessity in addressing students' emotional gaps and vulnerabilities.

Low academic motivation among students emerged as another prominent theme, reflecting principals' concerns about declining engagement, effort, and commitment to learning. Participants attributed this issue to a combination of family problems, uncertain future prospects, socio-economic pressures, and weakened perceptions of education as a meaningful pathway to success. This interpretation is consistent with international evidence linking student motivation to broader social and familial contexts rather than solely to classroom instruction (7, 8). Moreover, research on leadership for equity emphasizes that principals play a critical role in shaping motivational climates by providing emotional encouragement, meaningful guidance, and supportive school cultures (1, 13). The findings suggest that female principals often perceive themselves as frontline actors in counteracting motivational decline, despite structural constraints that limit their capacity to address underlying socio-economic factors.

The identified need for self-care programs highlights principals' awareness of students' psychological strain, emotional fatigue, and limited coping skills. Participants described students as increasingly exposed to stressors related to academic pressure, family instability, and social expectations, yet lacking formal opportunities to develop emotional regulation and self-care competencies. This finding resonates with research emphasizing the growing importance of social-emotional learning and well-being-oriented leadership in contemporary schools (12, 13). Female principals' advocacy for self-care initiatives reflects a broader shift toward holistic education models that integrate emotional health with academic development, particularly in adolescent populations.

Academic decline resulting from marriage emerged as a particularly critical concern, especially in the context of girls' secondary education. Principals reported that students who married during their schooling often experienced reduced attendance, diminished concentration, and eventual withdrawal from education. This finding aligns with studies conducted in developing and transitional societies, which document the negative educational consequences of early or student marriage, particularly for girls (5, 9). Female principals' narratives suggest that they perceive marriage as a turning point that redefines

students' identities and priorities, often in ways that conflict with sustained educational engagement. This underscores the intersection between educational leadership and broader gendered social norms, highlighting the emotional and ethical dilemmas principals face when students' educational rights are constrained by cultural expectations.

Similarly, academic decline associated with migration was identified as a recurring challenge. Principals described how student or family migration disrupted educational continuity, peer relationships, and emotional stability, leading to learning gaps and adjustment difficulties. This finding is consistent with international literature emphasizing the vulnerability of migrant students and the leadership challenges associated with supporting them within school systems (2, 10). Female principals' accounts suggest that they often assume a mediating role in facilitating students' adaptation to new environments, while simultaneously addressing emotional distress and academic setbacks.

Concerns regarding students' non-compliance with health care practices further illustrate the expanding scope of principals' responsibilities. Participants linked inadequate health behaviors to insufficient family supervision, limited health education, and economic hardship. This finding supports prior research indicating that principals increasingly confront health-related issues that indirectly affect students' academic performance and school engagement (8, 13). Female principals' sensitivity to these issues reflects a holistic understanding of student well-being, in which physical health, emotional stability, and academic readiness are viewed as interdependent.

The lack of interest in technical and vocational education tracks emerged as another significant sub-theme, with principals noting negative perceptions among students and families regarding the social status and future prospects of such pathways. This finding echoes studies documenting societal biases against vocational education and their impact on student motivation and identity (15, 22). Female principals' reflections indicate that students enrolled in these tracks often experience disengagement and diminished self-worth, placing additional emotional and motivational demands on school leaders to counteract stigmatization.

Parental divorce was identified as a major psychosocial factor influencing students' emotional and academic functioning. Principals described students from divorced families as more prone to emotional instability, behavioral challenges, and academic difficulties. This finding aligns with extensive research linking family disruption to adverse educational and psychological outcomes (5, 12). Female principals' narratives suggest that they often provide compensatory emotional support for these students, reinforcing the role of school leadership as a stabilizing presence amid family instability.

Finally, spousal opposition to continuing education was highlighted as a deeply rooted cultural challenge affecting some students, particularly married female students. Principals reported instances in which students were discouraged or prevented from pursuing education due to spousal or familial pressure. This finding is consistent with research emphasizing the persistence of gender-based constraints on women's educational participation in certain cultural contexts (4, 9). Female principals' accounts reveal the emotional burden of witnessing educational exclusion while possessing limited institutional authority to challenge deeply entrenched social norms.

Taken together, the findings underscore that female principals experience their interactions with students as emotionally intensive, morally complex, and deeply relational. These experiences align with international evidence highlighting women's leadership as particularly attuned to care, equity, and student well-being (3, 14). The study contributes to the literature by illuminating the lived meanings underlying these leadership practices, demonstrating that student-related challenges are not peripheral concerns but central to principals' professional identities and daily experiences.

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The study was conducted with a relatively small sample of twelve participants, which, while appropriate for phenomenological inquiry, limits the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. The focus on married female principals in girls' upper secondary

schools within a single city may also restrict the transferability of the results to male principals, unmarried female leaders, mixed-gender schools, or other regions. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews may be subject to social desirability bias, as participants may have emphasized socially valued aspects of their leadership experiences.

Future studies could expand this line of inquiry by including a more diverse range of participants, such as male principals, principals in boys' or coeducational schools, and leaders from rural or less-resourced areas. Comparative qualitative studies across different cultural or national contexts could further illuminate how socio-cultural norms shape principals' experiences with students. Longitudinal research designs may also provide valuable insights into how principals' perceptions and experiences evolve over time in response to changing educational and social conditions.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for professional development programs that equip school principals with skills related to emotional leadership, student counseling, and crisis management. Educational policymakers should consider integrating structured student support and self-care programs into school systems to reduce the emotional burden placed on principals. Finally, stronger collaboration between schools, families, and community organizations is essential to address student-related challenges that extend beyond the educational domain.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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